

NEW MEXICO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Secretary Catherine Torres, M.D.

NEW MEXICO ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT
Secretary David Martin

For Immediate Release:
May 24, 2012

Media contacts: Chris J. Minnick (DOH)
Cell: 575-649-0754
Jim Winchester (NMED)
Cell: 505-231-8800

Smoke Advisory Issues for Areas Affected by Wildfires in Gila Wilderness

(Santa Fe) – The New Mexico Department of Health and New Mexico Environment Department today issued a smoke advisory for areas of New Mexico affected by smoke from wildfires in the Gila Wilderness in southwest New Mexico. Wind directions from the west to east have caused smoke impacts as far away as Roswell and into west Texas.

Wind shifts could bring smoke impacts to other locations. The latest wind direction forecasts from the National Weather Service indicate wind will gradually shift into a southeast to northeast direction heading into the weekend. This could lead to smoke impacts for the Rio Grande Valley area. Based on current extreme drought conditions, it is possible that smoke in the region could persist until the monsoon season.

“Even if you cannot see a wildfire burning in your area, the wind can bring smoke that can cause unhealthy conditions for you or your family, so it is imperative that all New Mexicans be aware of smoke and take the right precautions to avoid health impacts,” said Department of Health Cabinet Secretary, Dr. Catherine Torres. “Poor air quality conditions associated with smoke are especially important for people with underlying health conditions such as asthma, emphysema, and cardiovascular disease.” Dr. Torres advises if symptoms associated with these conditions do not respond to the usual recommended medications, people are advised to see a health care provider immediately.

Both Departments advise that the public should avoid using swamp coolers when the smoke levels are higher than normal.

“Most swamp coolers have filter pore sizes that are much too large to filter out particles from smoke,” New Mexico Environment Department Secretary David Martin said. “The typical rule of thumb is if it smells like your swamp cooler is bringing in smoke from the outside, it’s best to turn the unit off until the outside air quality improves. The same rule applies to automobile air-conditioning.”

Both Departments recommend motorists use recirculated air while using air-conditioning during smoke events. Additionally, when smoke levels are high, do not use anything that burns, such as candles, fireplaces, or gas stoves. Do not vacuum because vacuuming stirs up particles already inside your home.

The New Mexico Environment Department and the U.S. Forest Service operate air quality monitors at multiple locations around the state. The monitors gather information about air quality conditions and help to keep the public informed. Data from the Environment Department and Forest Service air monitors can be found at <http://air.nmenv.state.nm.us> and <http://www.satguard.com/usfs/default.asp>.

In areas without air quality monitoring equipment, visibility can serve as a good substitute in determining air quality. People should use the following guide to determine air quality from visibility: if visibility is 10 miles and up, the air quality is good; six to nine miles, air quality is moderate; three to five miles, air quality is unhealthy for sensitive people; one and a half to two and a half miles, air quality is unhealthy; one to one and a quarter miles, air quality is very unhealthy; and three quarters of a mile or less, air quality is hazardous.

The procedure for making personal observation to determine smoke concentrations is as follows:

- Face away from the sun
- Determine the limit of your visibility range by looking for targets at known distances. Visible range is that point at which even the high contrast objects totally disappear
- After determining visibility in miles, use the chart to determine the appropriate visibility category.

In areas of the state with poor visibility of three to five miles, people with heart or lung disease, the elderly, children, and pregnant women should avoid prolonged or heavy exertion and stay indoors as much as possible. If you have symptoms of lung or heart disease that may be related to excess smoke exposure, including repeated coughing, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, wheezing, chest tightness or pain, heart palpitations, nausea, unusual fatigue or lightheadedness, contact your health care provider. Also be sure you have the medicines needed for your chronic heart or lung problems.

For more information about the health effects related to smoke from wildfires, go online to https://nmtracking.unm.edu/eh_alerts/ . For more information about fires in New Mexico go online to <http://nmfireinfo.wordpress.com>.

###